

Recreational Gambling and Health

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers have recently reported that even recreational gambling is associated with mental health problems. From a national U.S. telephone survey of over 2,000 adults, past and present gamblers were more likely than non-gamblers to report alcohol use or dependence, current substance dependence and a lifetime history of depression. Current gamblers were also more likely to have been incarcerated than past and non-gamblers. This is the first report from a major survey to report mental health problems associated with recreational gambling and not pathological gambling. In this 1998 study, pathological gamblers were excluded and non-gamblers made up only 15% of the sample. Over the past several decades, participation in gambling has dramatically increased with the widespread availability of legalized gambling. Two out of every three U.S. adults gamble each year, contributing to an estimated \$550 billion legally wagered and to \$50 billion in gross gambling revenues. Problem gambling is seen in only around 5% of U.S. adults, suggesting that great majority are keeping their gambling at recreational levels. The current study shows that even this level of gambling is associated with substance abuse and depression. For example, substance abuse was seen in 10% of current gamblers and 3% of non-gamblers and depression was reported by 30% of current gamblers and 23% of non-gamblers. The negative mental health correlates of recreational gambling are similar to problems seen in pathological gamblers. Those who avoid gambling altogether are a group with particularly low rates of substance abuse and depression. The higher rates of these problems in gamblers may be either a cause or effect of gambling. The findings suggest that no amount of gambling is entirely risk-free. The research team was led by MIRECC researcher Marc Potenza. MIRECC researchers Rani Desai and Bruce Rounsaville as well as Yale investigators Paul Maciejewski, Barbara Caldarone, Idil Cavus and Carolyn Mazure also participated.